

Stranger Things 3 by filltheemptysoul

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Summary: My take on a third season, because I'm bored and apparently have too much time on my hands? Strap in tight because there's gonna be some plot, some fluff, and most of all, some good ol' DND. Standard pairings (and eventual Jopper, probably) but lots of good plottiness too.

Stranger Things 3

September 1st, 1985

A high pitched warble broke the silence of the shadowy stand of rotting trees, echoing through the mist-filled, upside-down counterpart to Mirkwood, as a lone demodog bounded across the cold soil and paused in a small clearing. It turned its petal-like face downwards, appearing to sniff at a trail of dark blood. At the end of the trail, in the center of the clearing, a small chunk of flesh sat, one side covered in the mottled, amphibian skin of some unfortunate creature of the Upside Down. The demodog padded closer, balancing a desire to snatch up the morsel with its master's psychically-transmitted curiosity and caution. The flesh was tempting – normally, the demodog subsisted off of the native fungi of that dark alternate dimension. It leaned closer, preparing to engulf the scrap of meat with its petaled mouth. Suddenly, the crack of a branch breaking echoed through the stand of trees. The demodog whirled around, only to be met with a brutal blow to the head from a metal crowbar. Something snapped in its neck and it collapsed, whimpering pitifully as its connection to the Mind Flayer was severed. The demodog's head, still moving weakly, followed the face of the crowbar-wielding man as he sank into a kneel, then turned to look at its unresponsive legs.

"Oh, you won't be going anywhere, I'm afraid." A soft voice came from the figure, muffled by the damaged respirator of his cobbled-together hazmat suit. "You see, your species has a weakness: your spinal cord serves as both a connection to your legs and to your hive mind. A sharp enough blow, directly behind the neck, serves to both paralyze you and prevent your communication."

The demodog snarled defiantly, but its roar quickly trailed off into a whine as its pain became apparent.

The man continued. "Ah yes, you are in pain. To be expected. But I'd recommend avoiding further noises – if you're too loud, I'll have to kill you – if you're quiet, though, you'll get to live as an asset for my research. The demodog snarled again, either uncomprehending or prepared to die, and the man was briefly reminded of the Wheeler

boy, yelling up at him in that middle school where his troubles had begun. "Let her go you bastard!" the child had cried, unaware of the immense effort that had gone into his research with Eleven, the years and years of work and observation, the discoveries that he was so close to revealing. And with the boy's hesitation and Eleven's reckless rebellion, all of that had been swept away, and as a result the creature's attacks had exiled him to this hellscape. A flash of anger swept through his dark eyes, and he drew a knife from his hazmat suit, stabbing through the back of its slimy head and destroying its desperate mind, still frantically calling for help through a psychic connection that no longer existed. Dr. Brenner cradled the dog with one arm, lifting his crowbar in the other, and turned away. He might have not gotten another test subject, but at least he'd have something to eat.

"A cold wind sweeps cuts through your clothes as you step into the throne room. Ahead of you, you see a hooded figure standing before the icy altar. He draws back his hood, revealing the face of your old friend, Benthius Balthazar!" The table erupted into gasps, with the exception of one Dustin Henderson, who stood up, looking at the rest of the table with the smugness of someone long-ignored who now was finally proven right.

"I knew it! Lando!" He crowed. "No one with a last name like Balthazar can be good!"

"What? How is Balthazar the ice wizard? No way, I call bull." Lucas scowled at Mike, who shrugged.

"It is how it is. Can't say I didn't give you any hints."

"Hang on, remember how Balthazar always left right before the ice wizard attacked?" Will intoned, looking excitedly between Lucas and Mike. "Dustin's right, it's been before us this whole time."

"I never liked Balthazar, but I didn't think he was evil! Ugh, Mike is getting too sneaky for his own good." Max rolled her eyes.

"Too sneaky." El nodded in agreement.

"Fine, okay, I'll believe it's Balthazar." Lucas shook his head, looking down. "What do we do?" Lucas's question was interrupted by Mike, who adopted the screechy voice of Balthazar.

"Yes, it was I, Balthazar, all along! And now I will sacrifice one of you to summon my true demonic master!"

"Not on my watch you aren't." Max picked up a die. "I'm gonna shoot him with my crossbow." She rolled and the die clattered across the table. "Ha! 14!"

"The crossbow bolt whizzes across the throne room. Balthazar cackles and deflects it with a bolt of icy lightning."

"Shit!" Max frowned. "I was really hoping that would work. Anyone else have any ideas?"

"We could charge him?" Dustin asked.

"What, charge a wizard who can shoot ice lightning?" Lucas gestured angrily. "It's hopeless!"

"I don't hear you with any better ideas." Dustin retorted. "Besides, it's better than just shooting a crossbow."

"Oh, don't bring me into this. You're the one who nearly got El killed back at the Frozen Stair." As the three argued, Mike sat back contentedly. Everything was going according to plan. Balthazar would put on a show, give them a bit of a fight, then run off, calling them unworthy. With the party divided, there was no way they'd come up with something – or would they? He watched as Will and Eleven whispered surreptitiously behind the rest of the party, periodically snatching glances at him. That wasn't good, they both were far too skilled at stymying his grand plans as Dungeon Master.

"Mike?" Eleven had looked up from her consultation and now looked at him questioningly. Mike felt a bit of a shiver run through him as he remembered the first time she'd said his name, barely three feet away in the same basement. *C'mon, Wheeler, snap out of it.* He thought to himself. *This is D and D time, not time for – well, whatever that thought was.*

"What is the floor made of?" Eleven finished her question, looking at him attentively.

"What?" Mike's brows furrowed at the odd question. "Like, the floor in here?"

"No. This floor is wood. Your mind-floor." Mike kicked himself. Of course she was asking about the game, of course she knew what the real floor was made of.

"Uh, ice, I guess. Yeah, the whole thing is ice." Mike frowned. What was she getting at?

"And the palace overhangs a cliff?" Will chimed in. Mike frowned again. Will had the knack for remembering the smallest details of Mike's locations, which came in handy when he was drawing. Unfortunately, it also meant that he was a whiz at spotting hidden opportunities that Mike would rather have remaining hidden.

"Yeah..." Mike was reluctant to concede this, but he *had* said it just a moment ago, so he didn't have many options.

"I cast fireball." El said.

"Me too." Will added.

"What are you talking about?" Dustin cried in exasperation, turning from his argument with Max and Lucas. "He's a magic user, he's gonna be able to block any lame-ass fireball, even if two people use it!"

"We're not aiming for the wizard. We're aiming for the floor." Will grinned as Mike's eyebrows shot up, realizing the flaw in his plan. They rolled their dice, Will's clattering to the floor.

"12!" Will cried from where he had bent over to see the die. Eleven looked down at hers, the hint of a smile playing at the corner of her mouth.

"What'd you get?" Max leaned over her shoulder.

"I rolled twenty." The party erupted in cheers, and Mike sighed. So

much for his epic boss fight. But like any good DM, he was prepared to roll with whatever his party sent him. And that was pretty smart of Will and El, to figure out the weakness to his plan, and it was hard to argue with their rolls as well. But he wasn't done yet, and he had his own idea for what could happen to Balthazar.

"Your twin fireballs crash against the floor, melting a vast hole through the icy structure of the palace. With a giant crack, the palace begins to collapse around you, as the overhang falls down. You barely manage to escape through the door, but as you look back behind you, you catch a glimpse of Balthazar flying away on a pulse of magical energy. You may have defeated him, but it seems he'll be back to fight another day."

"Aw yeah!" Dustin high fived Will, a massive smile breaking out across his face. "Loot loot loot loot!"

"Nice one." Max gave Eleven a friendly punch on the shoulder.

"I call his gold!"

"You can't call all his gold, Lucas, we need to share!"

"Mike, Will's mom is here!" Mike's mom called down the stairs. "Tell your friends to finish up, it's a school day tomorrow!"

"We just finished!" Mike called back in response, then turned back to the party. "All right guys, let's clean up." They quickly shuffled their papers into Mike's DMing folder and raced up the stairs, nearly running into Joyce Byers as they rushed through the door.

"Hi mom – augh, not now!" Will complained as his mother swept him into a hug. "My friends are all here!"

Joyce reluctantly released him, ruffling his hair. "Just glad you're good." This had been something of her mantra over the past year, after not just one but two instances where her boy had nearly been lost forever. "Let's go."

The Byers's were the first to leave, followed by Dustin. Max and Lucas headed out next, Max riding on the back of Lucas's bike. Mike shook his head as they left. After the Snow Ball, the two had been

inseparable for a month, then suddenly transitioned into awkwardness again. Now they were friendly enough, but Mike still wondered what was going on with them. He hadn't seen them hanging out together alone, but he still wished he wasn't quite so in the dark. Not that he knew what was going on in his own romantic entanglement, he thought, looking at El. He knew what he had to do, Dustin and Lucas had told him as much. Even Max had gotten into it. *Just ask her to be your girlfriend, you dolt. She's head over heels for you.* But it had been all too easy to postpone the question from meeting to meeting, forever waiting for a better time. It didn't help that she'd been confined to the cabin for the past year, only available to hang out once a month. But another issue had also crept at the corner of his mind. Did El even understand what it meant to be someone's girlfriend? She still had precious little experience of the real world and real relationships. What if she thought it was just a friend who was a girl? Or what if she thought kissing was just a friend thing, and wouldn't want to be his girlfriend once she realized what it meant? Not only that, but tomorrow was the first day of high school – and El's first day outside of the near-house arrest she'd been in for the past year. What if she found some other guy at school who was cooler than him? Or, God forbid, a sophomore?

"Did you have a good time?" The words rushed out of his mouth, his nerves getting the better of him.

El nodded in response, then pursed her lips, about to ask a question. "Mike?"

"Yeah?" Mike's heart leapt a little at her voice. He always had a soft spot for when Eleven asked him questions, ever since they first met.

"Friends don't lie." Mike looked at her in confusion. Had he been lying about something? Then Eleven drew in a deep breath, staring him dead in his eyes, and he realized she was prompting herself to say something, not him. A sudden pang of worry gnawed at his heart. "I need to tell you something."

"Yeah, sure. You know you can tell me anything, right?" Mike's worry grew.

"Yes." She paused again. "I –"

She was interrupted by Chief Hopper's loud knock at the door. Eleven turned away, watching as Mike's mom and Hopper exchanged pleasantries at the door, then looked back to Mike, a desperate expression in her eyes. "Too much for now. Tomorrow. I promise."

Mike nodded. "Okay." She smiled a bit and stepped in, hugging him briefly.

"Alright, c'mon kiddo." Hopper placed a hand on her shoulder, leading her out the door. Mike watched, a strange knot forming in his chest as they drove away.

The kid was quiet today, Hopper was sure of that. Normally when they left the Wheelers's Jane would go on and on about Lucas this, and Dustin that, and Mike Mike Mike Mike. Part of it drove him up the wall, but another part of him was glad she had such good friends. God knew he didn't when he was that age. But today something was up. She'd barely said a word to him, and was looking all downcast. Whatever it was, it had better not be about that Wheeler kid, Hopper resolved, because he had no idea how to handle teen angst. Still, something had to be done.

"Hey kid, what's on your mind?" Hopper asked, his casual tone masking his concern.

"Why was Papa a bad man?" The words sprung from her mouth immediately as if precomposed.

"Well, to start with, he hurt you, and he hurt other kids—"

Jane interrupted him. "No. Not why. How he became a bad man." She looked at him, and Hopper took his eyes off the road for a moment to meet hers, dark and filled with worry.

"I don't know." Hopper sighed, looking ahead. "Some people, well, people hurt them, and they get angry, and then they become bad. That's the most common kind, people are hurt and scared, and want to make other people hurt and scared because that's the only way they know how to feel good about themselves." Brenner didn't seem like that though. He wasn't angry, *per se*, just determined. "Other

people are born bad. We call them sociopaths. They, well, they don't know how to put themselves in someone else's shoes."

Eleven looked askance. "They can't put on shoes?"

Hopper frowned. "No, no, it's an expression. They – they don't think other people are *people*. Not really. They don't think about how other people feel. I think that Papa was a sociopath. He just – it seemed like he didn't think other people were people."

Eleven nodded, looking down again. "When Papa had Mama, a man shocked her. I found the man. I was angry." She paused, gathering her thoughts. "But he had kids."

Hopper nodded. He'd slowly began to piece together Jane's journey to Chicago over the past year, hearing about Kali and their gang. "That's another type of man. That type isn't bad by nature, that type is just weak. They'll do anything for someone like Papa, who will tell them too."

Jane's face grew troubled. "You said that hurt people become bad men. Papa hurt me. Could I be bad?"

"No – no, you couldn't be. You're strong, strong enough to be good." He smiled at her and took one hand off the steering wheel and ruffled her hair. "These are hard questions. What's good is that you're asking them. Bad people don't think about why people are bad, they just are."

Jane nodded, absorbing this information. "I don't think you could be bad either."

"Well thanks kiddo, I'd like to think that about myself too." Hopper smiled at her and got a little smile back. *Whew. Way easier than dealing with something about that Wheeler kid.*

Will bolted upright in bed, a cold sweat coating his body. He'd dreamed about the Demogorgon again. Its faceless visage had haunted his mind for the past two years now, first through the Mind Flayer's possession and now through the more ordinary post-

traumatic stress that Dr. Owens had talked about. He pulled his covers over himself further, smothering himself in their warmth. *He likes it cold.* He rubbed one hand along his shirtless side, feeling the rough scar tissue of the burn that Nancy had given him. He rolled from side to side, trying in vain to return to sleep, but found himself walking to the bathroom instead. Last year, he'd had another sleepless night, which had culminated in a vision of the Mind Flayer. He splashed some warm water on his face, then looked at himself in the mirror. He'd gained back a bit of weight, and there was a color in his cheeks that had been absent during the possession. His mind was better now too. He remembered feeling the cold tendrils of the Mind Flayer's psyche seeping through his head even before the full possession. It had almost felt like a physical location in his head. Curious, he reached out again there, feeling the blank space in his mind that the tendrils had occupied. Or was it blank after all? It was almost as if there was a tiny nub in his brain, a small scar like the one on his side. He suddenly felt anger welling inside him. *Why won't you leave me alone? Why aren't you gone? WHY ARE YOU STILL HERE?* He screamed internally, pummeling the tiny piece of scar tissue within his mind. And then something broke, and his vision of the bathroom dissolved into a dark, empty world filled with nothing but a thin layer of water.